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Book Review of Challenging Authority

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Challenging Authority by Frances Fox Piven (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006, 200 pp., hardcover, \$21.95).

Reviewer: Douglas Klayman, American University/Social Dynamics, LLC, USA

Frances Fox Piven's historical account of the dynamics of social protest movements sheds light on the body of research that largely ignores the impact of ordinary people on social policy reforms in the United States. Piven affirms the power of social protest movements to exact change on the social, civil, and political rights of citizens through the development of disruptive power and strategic alliances that fragment and draw concessions out of major political parties.

According to Piven, the electoral democratic process is limited due to rules and social structures that govern how and when ordinary citizens engage in disruptive power. Once a political party is selected, money makes politicians beholden to corporate interests rather than citizens' interests, minimizing the value and true meaning of democracy. Although the normal routes (electoral politics) to popular influence limit access to political power, Piven shows convincingly how ordinary people can force change by their participation in protest movements.

However, the ability of ordinary citizens to mobilize disruptive power depends largely on historical circumstances that allow them to withhold their cooperation from economic elites in exchange for policy reforms. For the withdrawal of cooperation to be successful, movement organizers must be ready to adapt their tactics in a fashion based on the tenor and nature of the response from the economic power structure. Piven explains that the attributes of disruptive power were harnessed by economic elites during the American colonial revolution on the basis of British colonial taxation along with the promise of a fully realized democratic system.

Piven then turns to the Abolitionist Movement to show that the two-party system forces the formation of unlikely coalitions which are susceptible to division by disruptive power, creating fragmentation of political majorities, coined dissensus. Protest movements fail, Piven explains, because they do not pose a risk of fragmentation. The causal chains that connect social protest movements to policy reforms can be traced to the impact of collective defiance and the institutional breakdowns that reduce the political power of electoral coalitions. The most compelling statement in the book is Piven's explanation of the eventual decline of social protest

movements, which often come about as a result of movement leaders being integrated into normal electoral politics once certain concessions are won.

Frances Fox Piven's *Challenging Authority* exemplifies public sociology due to its historical and thought provoking analysis of social movements from the American colonial period through the present, as well as its general readability and potential appeal to non-academic audiences. Fortunately, it is also a detailed and analytical account of social movement development and progress that would be a useful text for upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses. *Challenging Authority* is a lucid, historical analysis of social protest movements that provides both empirical examples of the successes and failures of efforts to reform US social policies as well as a theoretical understanding that changed this reviewer's way of thinking about the principles of collective organizing.

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